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THE INFLUENCE OF THE FRENCH REGIME
IN THE VALLEY OF THE FOX.

BY

ELLA HOES NEVILLE

President of Wisconsin State Federation of Women's Clubs

[From Proceedings of The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1898]

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THE INFLUENCE OF THE FRENCH REGIME IN THE VALLEY OF THE FOX.¹

BY ELLA HOES NEVILLE.

The three great nations which fought at different times for the possession of the new world, each left the mark of their influence, which remained for a time on the settlements which they had made. The invasion of the Spanish, in the 16th century, was an invasion by fierce warriors inspired by lust of gold and conquest. The civilization which they founded was scarcely better than that they supplanted. After them came the French, full of the spirit of adventure, with the Jesuit fathers urgent to win the souls of the conquered people, and gather them within the bosom of the Church. Religion and the fur trade went into the wilderness hand in hand; it was expected to found an empire on peaceful traffic, and the gospel of good will.

The English, a nation which left the most lasting influence on people and customs, thought little and cared less for the welfare of the native possessor of the lands. They drove the savage tribes from their hunting grounds; went in and inhabited, or ravaged and destroyed. The policy of the French was different. They came with the spirit of genial comradeship; married and inter-married, and reared their dusky race in the forests — a race from which are descended some of the first families of Wisconsin.

As bold and hardy pioneers of the wilderness, the Frenchman has rarely found his equal. In his own country, what he had of civic ability faded under the voluptuous court of Versailles, while his mind and heart were kept in leading-strings by a

¹ Address before the State Historical Convention at Madison, February 22, 1899.

church which was absolute. The new world gave him unbridled liberty; it also gave scope for his energies, and showed the stuff of which he was made. Consequently it became the field of his most noteworthy accomplishments. Here he led the way in the path of discovery, always in peril, but with an indomitable spirit that overcame difficulties and laughed at danger.

When on the Plains of Abraham, New France passed into possession of the English, there was little change in the life of the French habitan. England succeeded to the policy of the French people, who were never colonists; they had not encouraged settlements, and England followed in the same path. She wished the land of the great Northwest to remain a wilderness — the home of the trapper and the fur trader, of the Indian hunter and the French voyageur; a barrier against the growth of the seaboard colonies toward the interior.

Here in Wisconsin, near the old fort at the mouth of Fox River, a little group of French hamlets had been planted, differing in culture and refinement from most other French settlements. Roosevelt, in his *Winning of the West*, in a general summing up of the French in that part of the country, says: "Three generations of isolated life in the wilderness had greatly changed the character of the trader, trapper, bateau-man, and adventurous warrior. It was inevitable that they should borrow many traits from their savage friends and neighbors. Hospitable but bigoted to their old customs, ignorant, indolent and given to drunkenness, they spoke a corrupt jargon of the French tongue. All their attributes seemed alien to the polished army officer of old France." It is clearly evident that Roosevelt had never made a study of the French and their descendants in the Fox River Valley, or he would have qualified this broad statement. In contrast to his estimate of the French settler, listen to what an old-time resident of Green Bay wrote in the early years of the century — and this a long time after that of which Roosevelt wrote, when race differences would have grown less, and deterioration of the French greater: "The settlers of Green Bay lived in primeval simplicity; of all people they seemed the most innocent, honest, truthful and unsuspecting. * * * They inherited their manners from their forefathers, the French, and

politeness and good breeding was the rule, from the highest to the lowest. It gave them ease and gracefulness of deportment, often a surprise and a reproach to the Yankees, rendering their company acceptable and engaging with the most cultivated and polite, and insuring in their intercourse with each other the preservation of friendly feeling and good will. * * * Frenchmen who have visited Green Bay have remarked on the purity with which the French language was spoken there compared with the Canadas."¹

I have wondered if the title of this paper were not somewhat of a misnomer. The French left no lasting impression on the development of Wisconsin as a whole; had they never come, the result would have been the same. Yet their influence is undoubtedly stamped on the character of the lower valley of the Fox, and the oldest town in the State, because of it, differs from any other western town.

Augustin de Langlade, the Father of Wisconsin, as we like to call him, planted, in the wilds of what is now a great State, the first home west of Lake Michigan, on the spot hallowed by the utterance of the first prayer to the living God. It stood on the banks of the Fox — about the site of the power-house of the electric street railway of the Green Bay of today — where, according to tradition, Allouez and his followers landed on the eve of the day of St. Francis Xavier, 1669, and celebrated mass, after their perilous journey.

The descendants of Charles de Langlade, son of Augustin, while not of pure blood, have yet been possessed of all the peculiarities of their French ancestry. They intermarried with other French families, which were gradually added to the settlement; and when the Americans came, the whole formed one neighborhood, controlled by French tastes and manners. The people were liberal, free-handed, and generous, intelligent and appreciative of the advantages of education. School-houses soon sprung up, and it is noted that every list of contributors to the support of the schools is liberally headed by a Grignon, a descendant of the De Langlades. The daughters of the family were sent to the convents of Montreal to complete their educa-

¹ A. G. Ellis's "Recollections," in *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, vii, pp. 219, 220.

tion, and they returned to La Baye, modest and virtuous, with a good education in the French language, a smattering of music and the arts, and irreproachable manners.

The French nation has never been noted for any of the characteristics of our Puritan ancestors. They were volatile, fond of ease and amusement, and, while upright and honest, were not given to steadfastness of purpose. They took up land along the river, -- two or three arpents wide, and running back indefinitely, -- and cultivated these small farms just enough for the sustenance of the family -- an easy task, for the land responded readily to cultivation, without the labor needed to revive an exhausted soil. Meat and fish were to be taken almost from the doorstep; and clothing was furnished from the spoils of the chase. The women had inherited from their ancestors a skill in culinary art; their preparation of the native foods was famed, even in foreign countries. Entertainment was lavish, without the weary restraints of formal etiquette and conventional rules. Under the low, bark roof there could always be found a fiddler ready to wield the bow, and moccasined feet tripped merrily to the gay tunes. Light and graceful, the native belles held sway, and many a young officer of aristocratic lineage forgot the claims of civilization in the witchery of their smiles.

Life was gayest in the autumn, for then the voyageurs from Quebec began to arrive on their way to the winter posts on the Mississippi. Their approach was heralded by the sound of gay boat-songs, caroled as they paddled their canoes up the river. They settled upon the little cantonment like a flock of birds of gay plumage, so brilliant was their attire. With shirts of gaudy stripes, blue trousers banded about the waist with scarlet sash, jauntily tied at one side, around the throat loosely-knotted colored kerchiefs, the head covered by a worsted cap or turban of variegated hue, this brilliant company always started a conflagration of fun, which, so long as they remained, ran riot.

In none of the other settlements of the State was life enjoyed to the same extent. Letters from the native youths exiled to the hamlet of Milwaukee are yet extant, in which the writers yearn for the pleasures of La Baye, especially for its music. "There isn't a fellow here who knows how to play a fiddle,"

bemoans one poor young man. Another, becoming unutterably weary of a winter there, made the long journey of over a hundred miles on snow shoes and alone, for only one week of unalloyed pleasure at La Baye Verte. It was then called "The City," in acknowledgment of its lively character.

The Grignons, Roys, Ducharmes, Brunettes, and Chevalliers formed a charmed circle. Some of them, through the fur trade, acquired considerable property, and were considered, for those days, wealthy men. Augustin Grignon, who had settled at the Kaukaulin rapids, lived in feudal style, and, with his Pawnee slaves and a number of engagés, exercised a hearty, though primitive, hospitality. His house was often so crowded at night as to inconvenience himself and family; but the cordial welcome, the happy smile, and the bountiful good cheer, never failed.

There were other men than those mentioned who left their stamp on the character of the first white settlement in Wisconsin — men of striking and impressive characteristics; but there is not time to individualize. This account, however, would be incomplete without at least brief mention of one who stands out a distinct figure. Judge Porlier was well born, of the old French nobility, and had received a good education in Montreal. It was said by those who knew him, that a few moments in his company assured you that you were in the presence of a man of culture and fine tastes. He was noted as well for his high moral character as for the purity and elegance of his language. Looked up to by his neighbors for counsel and assistance, many of their business papers are found to be in his handwriting; and nearly all, we are told, were made without compensation. It was not alone his superior intelligence and his high bearing as a gentleman which gave him the strong hold he had on the affections of the people, but his goodness of heart, and readiness at all times to help a friend.

The settlement at the mouth of the Fox passed slowly through the successive stages of village, town, city. A decade or so ago, it was sometimes dubbed old-foggyish and slow. It is true that the old town had gotten along in years before it threw off the spirit of the insouciant, happy beginning, and took on the

cold, commercial temper of other communities. It seemed, and yet seems, to hold an obligation to the past, which the present has not power to make it forget. There was a witchery about it that caused each new comer to throw off care, and live in the pleasure of the moment. The houses, through the lay of the farms along the river front, were not far apart, and in the town of Navarino there was a bond of goodfellowship which made the settlers as of one family. Even after the Americans outnumbered the French, there was an intoxication in the very atmosphere, under the spell of which each and all fell. The claims of business were never too pressing to give way to a dance, a sail, or a picnic party.

One bright morning the little town awoke to find itself left far behind in the march of progress. Since then it has never been quite the same. It will always hold its rich legacy from the past; but within the last decade or so, it has become a thriving commercial city. Men of business hold the reins, and the descendants of the old French habitants have yielded acre after acre of their rich possessions, until now they have little which they can call their own. There are but few of them left, but they have the veneration and respect of those who, in their turn, are now old settlers.

But a few years ago, there was occasionally to be met on the streets of the city, like a spirit of the past, a tall, stately woman, above the average height, of dignified presence and imperial bearing—one of the last of the descendants of the "Father of Wisconsin," Augustin de Langlade. Miss Ursule Grignon was a part of the best of the old French régime. Of a gentle, courtly manner, modest and retiring, with a fine command of language, her presence was always a delight. As one passed her on the street, in her black garb, with a shawl drawn tightly about her sloping shoulders, one intuitively felt her birth and breeding. It was a pleasure to receive her recognition, and the personality of her bow was as a benediction. Miss Grignon's last appearance at a social gathering—in early years she was one of the happiest, gayest, most eagerly sought dancers of them all—was in the old colonial home of one whom we of today love and respect, as a part of the last of the old

garrison days. She stood beside her hostess in a drawing room filled with spindle-legged furniture and old pictures, a charming presence, cheerfully, benignly receiving the greetings of the newer, younger, — I can not say better, — Green Bay; a link between the dreamy, peaceful life of the past, and the pushing, commercial existence of today.

The old French régime has passed away. It has, however, left, in the valley of the Fox, a heritage which clings as the odor of flowers to the vase which is shattered, perfuming and refining the rough vessel of clay.

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